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By William Le Queux

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(Continued.)

"I—I regret, Mr. Ralston," she answered at last. "But you must remain silent for any word you utter against him would reflect upon myself." Then, after a pause, she added, "His arrest would mean my destruction—my self-destruction."

"What—suicide?" I gasped, staring again straight at her.

She nodded in the affirmative, while her chin fell upon her breast as though in shame. A dead silence fell between us. Could this be the bright, happy girl who, with her mother, had visited the Stáplotons and who had sat with me at luncheon? Could this be Elfrida, whom Myra had afterward told me was her best and most devoted friend? I rose and paced the room, while she sat with her chin still resting upon her hand, her eyes fixed upon the red carpet. Was it for the purpose of telling me this amazing story concerning Granny Gough's enemy that she had contrived to come to London and seek me? Or had she some ulterior motive? I glanced at her furtively. She was sitting silent, immovable, almost statueque.

Suddenly I halted before her, and, bending slightly, inquired in a low voice: "May I not know something further, Miss Maynard? You are in distress. This man, whose mastermind is of such criminal inclination, holds you in his thrall. You wish to escape. Is that not so?"

She nodded. "Then may I not assist you? Garshore is Myra's enemy; he is Gough's enemy, as well as yours. Cannot we combine for the purpose of bringing him to justice?"

"No," she responded quickly. "Do not suggest any such thing, for my sake!"

"And why?"

She paused. Then at last, lifting her eyes to mine, she said: "Because—because if he falls into the hands of the police he will make a charge against me—a disgraceful charge," she cried, bursting suddenly into a flood of tears—"a charge that I could never face!"

CHAPTER XXII

In Which I Make a Promise.

I stood there before her in silence. To what hidden chapter in her history had she referred? I recollected her words of half an hour before, when she had told me that Granny was the victim of the scoundrel Garshore. "The victim of untoward circumstances—like myself," she had declared.

Had the charge that she dared not face—the charge which, if made, would—she plainly told me—bring self-destruction upon her, any connection with the mysterious affair in Redcliffe Gardens?

It has been alleged that she was the only living witness against Granny, and yet, in face of her statement to me, how could that be?

That she feared this man Ceol Willoughby, alias Ruford, alias Garshore, and alias a dozen other names, was only too apparent. Yet if she dared not allow me to assist her, why had she faced a breach of the conveniences and come here to my rooms alone?

Her manner, and the fear possessing her, puzzled me greatly. What secret lay behind those dark, luminous eyes? I changed the subject and spoke of Granny, expressing wonder regarding his present whereabouts.

"Myra told me that he is abroad, she thinks. She has not heard from him."

"Garshore is his enemy," I remarked with a slight sigh.

"I know!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing quickly. "I know that Mr. Gough has fled in fear."

"Why?"

She shrugged her shoulders in pretense of ignorance. But fixing my eyes upon her, I urged—

"Come, Miss Maynard, why not be frank with me? Why do you fear this man Garshore's vengeance?"

"He—he was once my lover," she said in a low voice, scarce above a whisper.

"And what, pray, does that matter?" I asked. "You discovered his real mode of life and abandoned him, as was but natural. He posed to you as an honest man."

"Yes. But—"

"But what?"

"I know too well the relentlessness of his revenge if he fell again into the hands of the police."

"And are you to be sacrificed merely because a clever detective officer identifies him?" I cried. "This is monstrous!"

"If he is arrested no argument will avail to turn him from the belief that it was owing to my information."

"Why?"

"Because it is so greatly to my personal interest that he should be sent back to prison," was her answer.

"You mean you would then be free from this thrall of a criminal, eh?"

"Exactly," she answered. "That is why you must swear, Mr. Ralston, to keep this knowledge to yourself. You will do so, won't you?"

"Well, if you insist, I suppose I must preserve the secret—only—"

"And you will not tell even your closest friend, Mr. Gough. Remember," she added, "you have given me an unfortunate girl's promise. And the carrying out of that promise means—means to me my life!"

She had risen stiffly at these words, and was looking into my face with a deep earnestness such as I had never before seen there.

She held out her hand, and I was compelled to grip it in confirmation of my pledge of secrecy. It's touch again thrilled me. How could I betray the woman I loved—even though upon her rested a mysterious shadow—the shadow of a guilt that must be revealed if this man Garshore were arrested?

And it was, she had declared to me, a guilt which she dared not face.

The mystery was growing deeper every moment. Was it possible that she had been jealous of that woman who was dressed as Lydia Popescu, and that her jealousy had led her to become associated in that despicable assassination?

Surely she was not a murderess? No. I would never believe that—never! When one is in love, one will accept nothing detrimental to one's divinity.

"I think, Miss Maynard," I said, still holding her tiny hand, "that you might speak plainer to me. You and I are now friends. A bond exists between us—the bond of secrecy. My sole desire is to protect my friend Gough and yourself from the evil designs of this master-criminal."

"That will, alas! be impossible," she sighed. "Mr. Gough is already hunted by the police. Garshore has told them the truth."

"Regarding what?"

"Regarding the charge now laid against him," was her answer.

"They say that—that you were witness of that dastardly crime at Redcliffe Gardens," I said in a low voice. "Is that the truth?"

"Garshore has made that statement. I cannot deny it."

"Why?"

"Because—because I dare not!" she exclaimed breathlessly, her hand trembling in mine. "Ah, Mr. Ralston, you do not know what I have suffered, what I am now suffering! I am fettered—bound hand and foot. I dare not speak—I dare not tell the truth, because it would mean I should lose my life through doing so."

"Is there no way out of this?" I asked, looking into those beautiful eyes of hers.

"None," she replied, shaking her head sorrowfully. "At least, only one."

"One!" I cried. "And what is that?"

"By clearing Mr. Gough of the terrible charge against him—the charge of murder," was her answer. "But, alas! you can never do that."

"Why?" I asked. "Is it because he is really guilty?"

"I am not his judge," was her response. "I will say nothing."

This reply was, to say the least, extraordinary. It conveyed to me the fact that Granny was guilty, and that it was true, as she alleged, that she was an actual witness of the tragedy.

My one and sole desire was to hold Garshore within the hollow of my hand. Yet by my promise to Elfrida I was prevented, rendered powerless.

Much of the story of Ruford, the master forger, had been related in the newspapers. I recollected having read that, but never had I dreamed that Ruford was identical with Ralph Garshore, the concession hunter, who had so cleverly filched a fortune from Granny Gough's fingers.

Again the story of that midnight tragedy in Redcliffe Gardens was becoming more complicated and more mysterious. Gough's demeanor that evening down at Sydenham was decidedly that of a guilty man. Yet, he being my friend, I refused to hold him in suspicion. Where was he now?

If he had really escaped the vigilance of those two men who had found him hidden at Colsterworth, why had he not communicated with me?

Even in that very small fact was mystery inexplicable!

From Elfrida I could gather nothing further. I released that hand, the contact of which caused my heart to beat quickly, and stood looking at that beautiful but troubled countenance with the downcast eyes, not knowing what to believe. What could I think? What would you, my reader, to whom I am here making this heart's confession, have thought?

I tried to gather the reason she had visited me there. I questioned her further, but she seemed to have changed her mind. She had now resolved not to act as first intended.

My chief thought was of Granny. Was he guilty?

She extended toward him a friendlyness, it was true. Nevertheless, she did not deny him guilty. She had merely replied that she was not his judge.

That hour was, indeed, a most momentous one in my career. I loved this woman—ay, loved her as I had never loved any woman in all my life. She held me in her power. She possessed my very soul.

Yet she stood aloof from me. She had been attracted by—perhaps, indeed, loved—that man whose disreputable past she had succeeded in unveiling—that man whom she dared not denounce because of this "disgraceful charge" that he could make and sustain successfully against her.

I took her slim hand again, and, looking into her dear fathomless eyes, asked her to consider me her friend—her firm, devoted friend.

"I will, Mr. Ralston," she promised in a faltering voice, dropping her eyes to the floor.

"Then tell me frankly why you have called here to see me?"

She hesitated, searching for an evasive answer.

"Because—well, because I wished to warn you against Garshore."

"I had already been warned," I said, with an incredulous smile. "Gough had warned me."

"He told you about—that woman?" she asked, looking at me quickly.

The emphasis she placed upon those final words, "that woman," was rather curious, I thought.

"Yes," I replied. "But tell me," I urged, "who was the woman who—who died so suddenly in Redcliffe Gardens?"

"Who was she? How do I know?" she asked blankly, her face growing paler.

"But you were witness of the tragedy!" I cried. "Have you not admitted that, Miss Maynard?"

"I have—I've admitted nothing," she asserted quickly. "You have misunderstood my words."

"Then pardon me," I said. "But I wished only to ask you a question. You have told me many things in strict confidence to-day. May I not know the identity of the dead woman?" I asked her, looking straight into her face.

She started and averted my gaze. By that I saw her intention to preserve some secret from me.

"I am unfortunate in ignorance," she answered.

"Have you ever heard of Lydia Popescu in connection with Garshore?" I asked.

"Yes—the name is familiar. Indeed,

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I believed the woman now dead to be Lydia. But she apparently was not!"

"You believed her to be Lydia?" I cried. "Then you were imposed upon!"

"Tell me, Mr. Ralston—tell me who she really was."

I was compelled to admit my ignorance, whereupon she smiled incredulously.

By this conversation one fact was established. She had been misled regarding the identity of the woman who had died by means so secret that doctors and analysts had been baffled, the woman against whom my own knife had been taken but abandoned.

At last, apparently finding herself too closely pressed by my questions, and with a firm resolve not to carry out the object for which she had paid me that secret visit, she declared that she must go. Her mother, she said, was at the Metrople awaiting her for luncheon.

"Then you have nothing more to say to me?" I asked, as she again took my hand in farewell.

"I think not, Mr. Ralston. Only, of course, I would ask you to regard my visit as a confidential one. I do not wish Myra to know that we have met here. And—and, above all, recollect your promise to say nothing of what I have told you concerning Ralph Garshore."

"If it be your wish, Miss Maynard, I will not," I assured her, in an earnest voice. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she said. "Remember your promise."

"Tell me," I asked, "Granny Gough is really your friend, is he not?"

"Yes," she replied, "he is. If I could secure his freedom I would; but—but I fear that is impossible—utterly impossible."

And with a swish of her skirts she passed out of my flat and down the stairs.

From my window, I watched her walk down St. Martin's lane in the direction of the Metrople, where her mother awaited her. As I watched that neat-waisted figure in blue with the gay summer hat strange thoughts occurred to me.

Those who passed her and cast admiring glances into her beautiful countenance little dreamed the truth—that she, a mere girl, was held in the thrall of one of the cleverest criminals of modern times.

Ah! the human tragedies that pass on every side amid the frantic bustle of the London streets.

I loved my dainty, dark-eyed divinity. But between us lay a great and formidable breach—a mysterious and dastardly crime of which she had been a witness and of which Granny Gough, my best friend, was suspected.

I strode back across the room, beside myself with frantic fear.

Had that woman—the only woman I had ever seen that I could really love—slipped from my life forever. I looked around at the four walls of my room, dismal, even though a streak of saint London sunlight slanted across it, and felt imprisoned there.

A blank existed in my life—a blank that could be filled only by Elfrida Maynard—my goddess, my well-beloved! Hitherto I had sneered at the sentimental man who fell into the toils of a pretty woman. But that day, for the first time in all my life, I knew what the passion of love really meant—I experienced the sensation of a seared heart.

I had halted at my writing table and taken up the telephone receiver to call up Cunliffe when of a sudden the door bell rang again.

I found there a telegraph messenger, and the message he handed me was of such a character that the lad must have thought me seized by a sudden madness.

I gave him sixpence and barked the door.

Then I reread those printed words upon the green "tape" pasted upon the white form, as all foreign messages are in London.

And those ominous, fateful words altered the whole course of my future. I became a changed man.

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